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“Blindness” **Sermon on John 9:1-41**

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John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents

answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵ He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶ They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷ He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰ The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

This is a story about blindness.

It is also a story of healing. A man who had never seen anything in his entire life—has an encounter with Jesus, the Light of the World. And, suddenly, he sees clearly. With his eyes. Then, as the text continues, he grows in his ability to see his healer through the eyes of faith. With each question he is asked by the people in his community, Jesus comes more and more into focus for him.

Still, today’s text is about blindness. Not physical blindness—Spiritual blindness. We see, in the variety of characters in this story, that they were reluctant to open their eyes to what had happened for this man. There had to be some other explanation for what they were seeing in front of them.

And maybe we understand this. It is difficult to open our eyes to what doesn’t fit inside our self-made parameters of what is possible. What we can accept is true. And, even what we are comfortable believing that God can do. Sometimes, it means turning a blind eye.

Of course, sin also comes up a lot in this story. The disciples bring it up almost immediately. Then the Pharisees talk about sin several times. Finally, Jesus mentions sin in the last verse. He is not willing to let the pharisees off the hook when they—halfway--ask if they are stricken by Blindness.

Which is why blindness is our topic today—not sin. Especially since Jesus tells us early in the passage that sin is not the point.

When the disciples saw Jesus turn his attention to the man who was born blind, they wanted to know who sinned—the man or his parents. Jesus' answer was clear and definitive: "Neither of them sinned." Essentially, Jesus goes on to say, "this is not about sin. This is about the Glory of God."

In Eugene Peterson's the Message translation, Jesus' response sounds a little different. He says to the disciples, "You are asking the wrong question. You are looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause and effect here. Look instead for what God can do."

And what God did, was to take notice of a man who had to stay on the outside edges of the community. And God healed him. Jesus made a little clay, put it on his eyes and told him to wash. And he did. And he could see. This is amazing good news! And, yet, you can't tell that from reading the story or from the reactions of people in the community. They could not see that this was good news. To them, it was confusing and unsettling.

Turns out, people then—like people now--are really more comfortable with placing blame. When hard things happen—it is easier to believe it only happened because "Somebody" made it happen. If we just stay away from and don't turn into that "somebody" well, things will be fine.

And, cause and effect, that is neat and tidy. If you do "this" then "that" will happen. If you don't do "this" then you don't have to worry about "that."

The Pharisees wanted life according to the Law to be "neat and tidy." They did. They wanted people to know what they can and cannot do so that they can be faithful to the law. There is cause and effect. There are laws to follow. Follow all of them and you are good. But, this is such a limited view of things. Which, is how the sinfulness of the man and his parents came into question. It seemed to go something like this.

"Bad things happen as a consequence for sin. You see, if you don't follow the Law, your child will be born blind." This was a neat and tidy explanation with the blame securely placed on ... well...the parents or the son. And, the point was made.

Which would also suggest that if you do follow the law, well then "no worries!" So, all I have to do is follow the law perfectly. But, wait. Is that even possible? There are so many laws. I mean, what if I get one wrong? Of course, there are rituals and sacrifices we can make to seek forgiveness. So, we're safe right? I mean, probably, right?

And, just like that, fear has taken a foothold.

It was fear that pushed the man born blind to the edges of the community before he met Jesus. Not his fear. The Community's fear. They could say that his "misfortune" or "hardship" was his own fault. But, there was just enough uncertainty—that they felt better if they didn't have to look at him much and could easily walk away. The thing about the edges—if you get to live in the middle—you don't have to deal with those edges too much.

In the middle, we can keep on telling ourselves that people get what they deserve. That people need to make better choices. That people need to buy their own boots, put those boots on, and then pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. If things are hard for them? Well surely they are to blame? Cause and effect is real. Natural consequences hit hard.

And this sounds logical. It even sounds like fairly solid parenting. Until Jesus comes along. And talks about our neighbors. He doesn't call us to "parent" our neighbors. He calls us to love our neighbors. And, he shows us how, if we are willing to see.

Jesus always looks to those on the edges. He sees all of us in the middle, too. But, he has a keen eye for those on the edges. And, Jesus wants us to follow his gaze.

But fear can be blinding.

If we choose to see things through cause and effect and then securely place blame. Well, we aren't really seeing clearly, are we? And, we know it.

Because, hard things happen—bad things happen—people get hurt—sickness happens—jobs get lost—relationships get broken. And, there is not always someone to blame. What's worse? If we do try to place blame, we hurt each other more.

In the case of the Blind man—he found himself pushed the edges of his community once again. He was an outsider because he was blind. Then, he was an outsider because he could see more clearly than anybody else.

Jesus, the Light of the World, calls us to see what he will show us. He calls us to look with the eyes of love. He calls us to believe in all the possibilities of what God can do for us and for others—even through us. We just have to be willing to see.

This story popped up for me to see, this week.

At 2:11 a.m., I called a county help line and whispered, "Nobody's bleeding. I'm just thirteen, my little brother is asleep, and I can't keep being the adult anymore."

"Tell me what's happening right now," the woman said.

I was sitting between the stove and the sink because that was the only place the trailer didn't feel like it was falling apart under me. My brother Noah was asleep in a laundry basket lined with towels because our old mattress had split open and the springs started biting through. "My mom's working nights," I told her. "She cleans offices, then drives food until morning. She'll be back around six. We're okay. I just... I don't know how to make this better tonight."

She didn't rush me.

"What would help the most before sunrise?" she asked.

I looked at Noah. One sock on, one sock off. Curled up so tight he looked smaller than six. "A bed," I said, and then I started crying so hard I had to press my fist to my mouth. "Just one bed where he won't wake up cold."

She asked my name twice, not because she forgot, but because she wanted me to hear it said back.

"Okay, Ava," she said. "Stay on the line with me."

Nobody came with sirens.

Just a knock that sounded careful, like whoever stood outside knew our door had been slammed too many times by life already.

A woman in jeans and a county badge stepped in first. A retired paramedic came behind her carrying two folded blankets and a paper bag that smelled like peanut butter crackers. Then a church volunteer from down the road brought a lamp with a yellow shade.

No speeches. No shame.

The woman knelt so we were eye level. "I'm Denise," she said. "Can we help without making a big scene?"

That was when I knew she understood everything.

She didn't stare at the dishes in the sink...She looked at Noah's red little hands and said, "Poor buddy's freezing."

The paramedic took off his boots at the door without being asked. He checked the heater, tightened something with a pocket tool, and got it breathing again like it had just needed somebody patient enough to listen.

Denise saw the notebook on the table.

"You draw?" she asked.

"Sometimes," I said.

"What do you draw?"

"Houses," I told her. "The kind with warm windows."

I thought she might smile the way grown-ups do when they feel sorry for you. She didn't. She nodded like I had told the truth about my part of America.

That night, they left us with blankets, groceries, a small space heater, and a note stuck to the fridge with blue tape.

It said: You are still a child. You do not have to earn rest.

I read it three times before I believed it.

When my mother came home at dawn, she smelled like bleach, french fries, and winter air. Her face dropped the second she saw the lamp glowing in the corner.

“Who was here?” she asked.

“People who didn’t make us feel poor,” I said.

She sat down hard in the kitchen chair and covered her mouth with both hands. I had seen my mother exhausted. Angry. Numb.

I had never seen her looked-after.

The next evening, they came back.

Not just Denise.

A librarian with a rolling cart. Two volunteer firefighters in work shirts. Mrs. Holloway from three trailers down, the one everyone said was nosy, carrying fabric and a sewing tin. A man from the senior center with a truck bed full of furniture somebody’s grandson had outgrown.

It felt less like charity and more like a barn raising, except for one tired family in a single-wide trailer in eastern Kentucky.

The firefighters brought bunk bed pieces and built them in Noah’s corner.

The librarian brought a reading lamp, three dinosaur books, and a free internet hotspot.

“Homework shouldn’t depend on luck,” she said.

Mrs. Holloway turned old curtains into a divider so Noah could have his own little “room.” Then she pinned up blue fabric with tiny white stars on it and said, “Every boy deserves a sky.” My mother kept saying, “You don’t have to do all this.”

Denise finally touched her arm and answered gently, “I know. We want to.”

That broke something open in the room.

Not bad broken. The kind that lets air in.

Noah climbed onto the bottom bunk and laughed so loud I nearly forgot what our trailer had sounded like before that sound lived in it. He bounced once, then looked at me like he needed permission to love it.

“It’s yours,” I said.

“You sure?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m taking the top. I’m old and dramatic.”

That got the first real laugh out of my mother in months.

Before they left, the librarian taped my newest drawing to the wall above the table. Not the fridge. The wall.

It was a house with bright yellow windows and four people inside, even though we were only three.

Denise noticed.

“Who’s the fourth?” she asked.

I looked at the picture for a long second.

“Maybe that’s the person who shows up,” I said.

She pressed her lips together and nodded like she didn’t trust her own voice.

That night, I lay on the top bunk and felt the mattress hold me in a way the floor never had. Noah was breathing slow below me. My mother sat on the edge of his bed with her shoes off, looking around like she had walked into somebody else’s miracle.....

I still draw houses with warm windows.

But now, when I draw them, I don’t leave the rooms empty anymore. I put people inside. Tired people. Proud people. People hanging on by a thread.

And at least one person at the door with a lamp in their hand.

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